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**For the People**  
**Dorothy Smith and Adult Education**  
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**Dorothy Smith et l'éducation des adultes**

Sara Carpenter and Genevieve Ritchie

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EDITORIAL

Sara Carpenter and Genevieve Ritchie

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# FOR THE PEOPLE: DOROTHY SMITH AND ADULT EDUCATION

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When Dorothy Smith transitioned in June 2022, she left us with a substantial body of work: more than a dozen authored and edited books; countless journal articles, perspective and opinion pieces; and hours of lectures available online. She was famous for her walks and recounted them in conversation easily, raising the question of how the act of walking helped facilitate the emergence of such a substantial body of knowledge. In articulating not just a feminist critique of sociology, but a feminist sociology, she set a task for herself akin to climbing a daunting hill. In her landmark text *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (1987), she argued:

A sociology is a systematically developed consciousness of society and social relations. The “established” sociology that has been built up over a period of some fifty to eighty years in North America (depending on when you choose to date its beginnings) gives us a consciousness that looks at society, social relations, and people’s lives as if we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives. It claims objectivity not on the basis of its capacity to speak truthfully, but in terms of its specific capacity to exclude the presence and experience of particular subjectivities. Nonetheless, of course, they are there and must be. (p. 8)

She was speaking, of course, of the academic discipline of sociology. Through her work to develop the idea of ruling relations, or the relations that rule, she helped us understand that these relations predate the establishment of sociology as an academic discipline, or the establishment of adult education for that matter. These relations reach deep into the material, social, and cultural past that has formed the hegemonic mode of life we live on this planet.

She was also speaking of the people who inhabit and every day make and remake this world, meaning *all of us*. And in this task, she named the stakes: no less than our consciousness, our ways of making meaning, our ways of being, and the inner relation of being/knowing that constitutes praxis and, thus, life. She provided, through her work, a

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way of understanding consciousness as fundamental socially, and she provided a sociology not about but for people, a way to unearth the constitution of the everyday world for the purposes of changing it. In this, she shared the social, critical, and transformational purpose of adult education. She never lost sight of actual people, but not people as isolated individuals. They were active, thinking people making a social world together through processes of social coordination. As Himani Bannerji (2022) argued, "Entering through the subject's experience, both personal and institutional, immediate and mediated, she could establish a two-way relationship between the personal and the social, the local and the extra-local, thereby abolishing an ontological bifurcation in actual reality" (p. 5). It is for these reasons, and many more, that Dorothy Smith should be read as a crucial theorist in the discipline of adult education.

The works—and we use this in Smith's sense of "work"—collected in this special issue spend a good deal of time helping us understand the application of Smith's most famous contribution, institutional ethnography (IE), to the discipline of adult education. For that reason, we will focus our brief introductory remarks on the importance of her epistemological and ontological reorientation of sociological inquiry and why this is so crucial in our field. These shifts are taken up through the papers included here, in part because we assert, as a group, that it is impossible to understand Smith's work without understanding her commitment to "reinterpreting Marx's epistemology" (Smith, 2004) from the standpoint of a feminist critique of ruling relations (Smith, 1997). Never given her due by male Marxist/ian scholars, Smith's reading and application of the entirety of *The German Ideology* is a fundamental intervention in understanding historical materialist dialectics as a method of inquiry. It is also an intervention into feminist theorization that reifies language and cultural representation, objectifies people (all of us, male/female, cis/trans, queer or not), and separates us from the material constitution of our world. Smith avoided the positivist pitfalls of reading Marx, and the cultural turn in feminism, by keeping her focus on developing a mode of inquiry that kept people, and their "doings," at the centre. In one of her last published pieces, with her long-time collaborator Allison Griffith, they warned us: "When research is dominated by concepts and theories that direct the research selectively, people become no more than sources of material to be interpreted in those terms—they become the objects of research" (Smith & Griffith, 2022, p. 29). This de-objectifying ontology is the key to understanding adult learners not as sociological categories, but as agentic, conscious, creative forces in our world who are doing the messy work of learning and unlearning the relations of ruling.

A mistake made by many scholars of IE is to not thoroughly study the books she wrote as her extensive sociological thinking coalesced into a method of empirical inquiry (Smith 1987, 1990, 1991, 1999). Without a thorough understanding of what she meant by "ontological shift," famously embodied on George Smith's T-shirt, the danger exists that we will consign Smith to the ground she so extensively unearthed: that is to turn her work into yet another methodology for the study of discourse, bureaucracy, and institutions. As Bannerji (2022) pointed out, very few Marxist thinkers have taken up the problem of ideology to the extent that Smith did in her work. Those who did have been historically relied on in adult education and produced an understanding of ideology, and thus consciousness, that is ideal in the philosophical sense and positions the educator as the great emancipator of the historically confused or, worse, suggests that social change proceeds from mind to

action, thus negating the dialectical relation of praxis. The extensive application of Smith's work by activists (Frampton, et al., 2006; Kinsman, 2020) and her profound influence on social movements, particularly in Canada, demonstrate the extent to which she was “on to something” in her articulation of ideology as an active process, an epistemology that becomes a way of doing things—that is, a praxis. In Smith's work, adult educators will find a revolutionary way of understanding not only what must be changed, but also that we and our communities are what will create the change.

All of the authors included in this volume position their scholarship, community work, and/or teaching in the web of social and textual relations that coordinate and constitute certain institutional sites. All have “walked” with Dorothy Smith through their work. The discussed institutional arrangements branch across community and activist groups as well as government bodies and universities. In this way, all of the authors are thinking in and through their active practical world. Smith's scholarship and method of IE guide them to ask situated questions about how the local institutional terrain is coordinated extra-locally, which is beyond and historically prior to the local.

As the editors of this volume, we charted an order for and sequentially grouped the articles in a way that speaks to the aspects of Smith's work that we think are crucial for the field of adult education. Bannerji provides a historically situated analysis of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The historical trajectory of EDI is located within capitalism's ability to reinvent itself and not in opposition to it. Bannerji deploys Smith's, and indeed Marx's, historicizing method to illustrate how institutional arrangements, including the state, citizenship, and multiculturalism, mediate subjectivity, consciousness, and the interpersonal. In their analysis of educational theory, Carpenter and Mojab tackle the ontological/epistemological question of how to understand and explain the relations of human experience and social transformation. In contrast to other modes of education research, IE offers Carpenter and Mojab a way to explain the social coordination of learning, education, and pedagogy. In concert, the analyses presented by Bannerji and by Carpenter and Mojab elucidate Smith's theorization of ideology to demonstrate how ideological consciousness negates actual human activity. The denial, that is negation, of consciousness and praxis is not simply the erasure of human activities, and learning, but also includes modes of theorizing that confound and mystify the interrelation of material, social relations, and learning.

In their respective articles, Butterwick, Kuk, McLarnon, and Malefant and Nichols both recount their IE projects and write reflexively of their own learning and growth as thinkers, teachers, and organizers. Through this reflexive process, they demonstrate how IE asks researchers to consider ideology, consciousness, and praxis not as objects of research but as relations, and relationships, within inquiry. Butterwick recounts her process of feminist consciousness-raising and politicization through her encounters with Smith's work. The reflective journey that Butterwick takes us on illustrates the materiality of Smith's feminist standpoint theory, which was grounded in the women's movement and did not seek a desocialized notion of embodied experience. Kuk grapples with trans-local activist-educator interpretations of Smith's work as well as the praxis of doing IE in the socio-historical context of democracy in flux. McLarnon draws focus to informal learning in the work of community gardening in Montreal. The work of gardening to produce food is textually organized, with the lives and work of participants hooked into the institutional

arrangements of NGOs, governments, funding bodies, and the like, vis-à-vis guiding documents. In the final article, Malefant and Nichols centre a methodological process that seeks critical knowledge by and for the benefit of precariously housed young adults. The authors suggest that there are important overlaps across participatory action research, critical adult education, and institutional ethnography. The research process is, for Malefant and Nichols, a way to speak back to the domesticating forces in contemporary forms of education and youth work.

Smith (1990) argued that the purpose of a sociology for people is to make an object of inquiry of "what we ourselves are immersed in," and to remember that ideological practices "are our own [emphasis added]. Explicating such practices enables us to become aware of how, in deploying them, we participate in the relations of ruling" (p. 11). In this special issue, we explicate how Dorothy Smith's work is absolutely crucial to uplifting the critical and social purpose of adult education. At a time when our field is the near perfect instrument for the continued neo-liberalization of the self, and of society, and we contend with increasing erasure of the historical roots of adult education in social struggle, we need to create rigorous knowledge that gives us tools for resistance and deeply critical, reflexive inquiry. We have, in adult education, this old metaphor of walking (e.g., Horton & Freire, 1990). We recognize the necessity of praxis, of making, thinking, and doing all together at the same time. Smith's lifetime of scholarship provides us with needed tools to move our work forward.

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